

Shutdown could affect DOE workers

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On the heels of 51 Swift & Staley employee furloughs, workers with two more U.S. Department of Energy subcontractors at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant may be temporarily out of work after Oct. 17 if Congress does not end a partial government shutdown.

Jim Key, vice president of the United Steelworkers Local 550 in Paducah, said Wednesday that LATA Kentucky and Babcock and Wilcox Conversion employees face potential layoffs and furloughs next week.

He said the shutdown — in its 11th day as Congress fails to pass authorization for sufficient funds for government operations — has prevented lawmakers from approving the subcontractors' scope of work. If Congress does not pass a continuing resolution by next Thursday, the projects could be halted and the employees ordered to stop working until lawmakers come to a resolution.

Lindsey Geisler, a spokeswoman with the DOE office of public affairs, said Wednesday that 51 workers with Swift & Staley — a subcontractor responsible for infrastructure services at the site — were furloughed earlier this week because of a lapse in appropriations stemming from the federal budget dispute.

“The Department of Energy directed the company to ramp down their operations to perform only those activities necessary to maintain safety, security, and the protection of human health,” Geisler said in an emailed statement. “Affected employees will be furloughed until Congress acts on a resolution to fund the government.”

Key said that LATA and B&W workers could receive similar notices next week. He said the notices would be interpreted as layoffs instead of furloughs for USW employees.

“Furlough is language used for federal employees by the government,” Key explained.

“We are not federal workers. We are workers for private contractors that have a government contract. We do not receive the same benefits or provisions of federal workers.”

Key said the union has 135 employees working for LATA and 100 working for B&W. When workers are furloughed, they continue to receive benefits, accrue vacation time and are promised a return date. When they are laid off, they do not receive benefits and a return to work is not definite.

Non-union employees would still be furloughed if the projects are halted, Key said.

Key did not comment on the Swift & Staley furloughs, citing a gag order from the DOE.

LATA, which stands for Los Alamos Technical Associates, performs decontamination and decommission — or full clean-up of the buildings and other facilities — at the plant.

It is made up of three companies: Babcock & Wilcox Technical Services Group, SM Stoller Corporation and LATA Environmental Services of Kentucky.

B&W workers are tasked to re-enrich canisters of high-assay depleted uranium hexafluoride, called tails, into low-enrichment uranium.

The DOE subcontracts with both groups for the separate duties, which are performed alongside the United States Enrichment Corporation's uranium re-enrichment work. That mission has shifted since a May 24 announcement that USEC, which has leased the plant from the DOE for years, would be shutting down and laying off the majority of its

roughly 1,100 workers within the year. The workers are now in the process of transferring the plant back to the DOE.

About 160 workers were laid off in August, while the second round of layoffs is slated for Oct. 14-25. Georgann Lookofsky, plant public affairs manager, said that the fewer than 100 workers set for layoff will receive notices next week and leave their jobs the following week. The remaining workers set to lose their jobs are slated to be laid off sometime in 2014.

Lookofsky said that the shutdown and the Swift & Staley furloughs are not affecting USEC employees at this point. She also does not anticipate any additional subcontractor furloughs or layoffs spilling over into USEC's operations.

"Through ongoing discussions with the DOE we will continue normally and are unaffected so far because of the shutdown," Lookofsky said. "We will continue to complete our work as necessary."